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ABSTRACT

This study examined the differences in family closeness and power structure between first semester college freshmen and upperclassmen. Fifty-two freshmen and fifty-four upperclassmen completed the Family Systems Test (Gehring & Feldman, 1988) to indicate the closeness and power structure in their immediate families. Aspen-Welch t-tests were used to compare the differences in the perceived closeness and power between the participants and their siblings as well as between the participants and their parents. The results indicate no significant differences between freshmen and upperclassmen in their perceived emotional closeness with parents and siblings or between their perceived power differences between themselves and their parents and siblings. These results contradict previous research findings that indicate that emotional closeness correlates negatively with physical distance and that parent-child relationships become more egalitarian after the child moves out of the household. Contains 40 references. (Author/SR)

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The College Experience and Its Effects on Family Closeness and Power

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Abstract

This study examines the differences in family closeness and power structure between first semester college freshmen and upperclassmen. Fifty-two freshmen and 54 upperclassmen completed the Family Systems Test (Gehring & Feldman, 1988) to indicate the closeness and power structure in their immediate families. Aspen-Welch t-tests were used to compare the differences in the perceived closeness and power between the participants and their siblings as well as between the participants and their parents. The results indicate no significant differences between freshmen and upperclassmen in their perceived emotional closeness with parents and siblings or between their perceived power differences between themselves and their parents and siblings. These results contradict previous research findings that indicate that emotional closeness correlates negatively with physical distance, and that parent-child relationships become more egalitarian after the child moves out of the household.

The College Experience and Its Effects on Family Closeness and Power

As children mature, their relationships with family members become more voluntary and less obligatory because they begin to determine for themselves the frequency and the nature of their family contact (Roberto & Stroes, 1992). However, this change is not always a gradual process. Previous research has identified several turning point events that are associated with marked changes in a relationship (Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Bullis & Bach, 1989; Holladay, Lackovich, Lee, Harding, & Denton, 1998; Lowenthal, Thurnher, Chiroboga, 1975). One common turning point experience occurs when a person graduates from high school and moves away from his or her family to attend college. The present investigation examines the family closeness and power structures of first semester college freshmen who have only been away from home for a few weeks versus the family structures of upperclassmen who have lived away from home for a year or more.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The field of family communication has long considered the family as a social system (e.g., Bochner & Eisenberg, 1987; Carter & McGoldrick, 1980; Hill, 1970). Considering the family from the systems perspective, a family is composed of individuals but familial interaction and communication can only be understood in terms of relation to one another and the functioning of the family as a whole. Bochner and Eisenberg (1987) state that the systems approach to family communication stresses that the family functions as a whole entity that is self-governing and self-regulated in order to maintain homeostasis.

Within the systems perspective, there are systems processes occurring within the family. These systems processes describe how the family (system) functions through the passage of

time. Thus, systems processes characterize how families interact on a daily basis and how they adapt in regards to environmental and developmental changes in order to maintain some functioning order (Yearby, Burerkel-Rothfuss, & Bochner, 1995). Yearby, et al. (1995) conclude that families accommodate to the changes in the environment and maintain themselves through their patterns of communication. Thus, communication within the family system is paramount in dealing with developmental processes that affect the family.

The family life cycle has been used to describe how families evolve through developmental stages over time (Bochner & Eisenberg, 1987). These developmental stages are typically associated with the entrance or exit of a family member, or as family members mature. For example, the entrance of a new family member could be a birth of a new child or blending of step families whereas the exit of a family member could be a child living apart from his/her family or the death of a family member. Regardless of the entrance, exit or maturation of a family, the family life cycle helps to define familial transitions that are predictable in nature due to the natural progression of family development (Hill, 1964).

Family structure has long been studied in many different disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, anthropology as well as the communication discipline. While many of these disciplines take a different approach to examining the organized structure of a family, the two primary dimensions of cohesion and power have surfaced in many of these studies (Fisher, Giblin, & Regas, 1983; Gehring & Feldman, 1988; Leigh & Peterson, 1986; Olson, 1986).

Emotional Closeness in the Family

Gehring and Feldman (1988) define family cohesion as "the emotional closeness that binds family members together" (p. 34). In other lines of research, emotional closeness is

characterized as a sense of shared experiences, trust, concern, and enjoyment of the relationship (Lee, Mancini, & Maxwell, 1990). Regardless of the operational definition given to this construct, Gehring and Feldman (1988) cite that closeness and cohesion are generally associated with positive adjustment and modification outcomes in families; thus, a family who has a higher level of closeness may adjust to different or difficult situations better than a family who exhibits lower levels of closeness.

In addition to the crucial parent-adolescent relationship, feelings of closeness appear to increase through middle age and into older adulthood for parents and their adult children (Cicirelli, 1991b). Furthermore, older adult sibling relationships express greater emotional closeness than younger sibling relationships (Goetting, 1986).

Another area of inquiry regarding the parent-adolescent relationship is the effects of biological sex on this relationship. Noller and Bagi (1985) found that late adolescents communicate more frequently and disclose at a greater depth regarding a broad range of topics to mothers rather than fathers. Additionally, female adolescents indicated greater frequency of self-disclosure to their mothers than the male adolescents (Noller & Bagi, 1985). More recent studies indicate that this finding regarding female adolescents communicating more frequently with their mothers is represented across all ages from 13 to 17 years old (Noller & Callan, 1990a; Noller & Callan, 1990b). Further, mothers were perceived to begin more conversations with adolescents, and comprehend and acknowledge the adolescent's viewpoint more than fathers (Fitzpatrick & Vangelisti, 1995; Noller & Callan, 1990a).

The same sex father-son relationship has also been shown to have an impact on emotional closeness. Morman and Floyd (1999) found that fathers and sons communicate

affection more through the provision of social support than through direct verbal or nonverbal expressions. The expression of such affection was found to be positively associated with relational closeness, self-disclosure, and communication satisfaction. Thus, biological sex is a variable that moderates the parent-adolescent relationship.

Power in the Family

Berger (1994) has provided an extensive overview of the way social power has been construed from a communication standpoint. In the field of communication, social power has generally been defined as a quality that enables a communicator to produce changes in his or her relational partner and/or to resist such attempts by another. None of these manifestations of power (being influenced by another, influencing another, and resisting another's influence) can take place within an isolated individual. These acts only take place between individuals in relationships through the use of communication. Thus power is conceived of as an attribute of a relationship rather than as an attribute of an individual.

Communication researchers have taken several approaches to studying social power. At the level of the individual, researchers have examined traits such as Machiavellianism, dominance, and locus of control (Berger, 1994). This approach assumes that individuals come to a relationship with certain personality characteristics that predispose them to take a power position within the relationship (Berger, 1994). From this perspective, researchers observe the communicative conduct of people they have identified as having a high score on a trait measure of power. Another approach to studying power is to differentiate among types of social influence. French and Raven (1959), for example, examine the following bases of power: informational power, reward power, legitimate power, referent power, and expert power.

Compliance-gaining researchers build on this analysis as they try to identify types of influence by creating taxonomies of strategies used to change another person's behavior, and by examining which strategies communicators select (or would be likely to use) in different situations (Seibold, Cantrill, & Meyers, 1985).

Interaction approaches to power consider power as a property of the relationship itself rather than as a property that individuals bring to their relationship (Berger, 1994). In other words, power is not dependent on the actions of one individual, but on the joint actions of all individuals within the relationship (Berger, 1994).

The examination of power in the family structures has taken several different forms and different operationalized definitions of the term. Power, in terms of family relationships, generally refers to the influence or dominance that exists in the hierarchy of a system (Gehring & Feldman, 1988). But Gehring and Feldman (1988) point to other studies that have examined family power in terms of decision-making abilities or control in different situations (e.g., Rollins & Thomas, 1979) and hierarchical relationships (e.g., Madanes, 1981); they conclude that since the definitions of power differ, the findings regarding family power conflicting.

The College Experience Turning Point

In order to examine closeness and power in college students' familial relationships, the use of a turning point was employed. Baxter and Bullis (1986) define a turning point as "any event or occurrence that is associated with a change in relationship" (p. 470). The use of turning point analysis has been employed to describe various relationships such as grandmother-granddaughter (Holladay, et al., 1998), romantic relationships (Baxter & Bullis, 1986), and chair-faculty relationships (Barge & Musambira, 1992). The turning point that was used as the

basis for the present study was that of moving out of the family home to attend a university. This turning point is a consistent developmental stage of a family life cycle.

This turning point of a child moving out of the home to attend a college typically necessitates a renegotiation of family roles and rules. The child is no longer living under the roof of the parent, thus not necessarily guided by the watchful eye of a parent. Characteristically, the adolescent becomes more independent of their parents; this independence or autonomy compels a renegotiation of family relationships (Fitzpatrick & Vangelisti, 1995). In the renegotiation of relationships within the family, the adolescent attempts to gain more control and higher status (Hunter, 1985).

The adolescent gaining independence from his or her parents is of great importance in the developmental process of an individual. Scholars have noted the importance of adolescents gaining more autonomy from their parents (e.g., Harris & Howard, 1984; Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986). For example, autonomy for adolescents involves learning how to deal with peer pressure and emotional attachment with parents (Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986). Another study indicates that if adolescents fail to negotiate a more equal relationship with parents who are highly critical and rejecting, the adolescents tend to assume negative identities (Fitzpatrick & Vangelisti, 1995; Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986). Additionally, the independent child is able to make decisions for his/herself that are independent of the parental units (Fitzpatrick & Vangelisti, 1995).

Golish (2000) examined how young adult's relationships with their parents changed over the years using turning point analysis. She identified seven major turning points that characterized changes in the emotional closeness between a parent and child from age five into

young adulthood. Of these turning points, physical distance was the most frequently reported turning point. Physical distance between the parent and child occurred when one parent moved out of the household due to divorce, or when the child left home to attend college or moved out of the parents' home.

As late adolescents mature into young adults, many individuals will choose to attend some type of advanced education. The relationship between parent and child continues to grow, and change through this life transition. In fact, university students consider their parents to be the most important influence in their lives (Wilks, 1986). Fitzpatrick and Vangelisti (1995) state, "most adolescents want to maintain close, positive relationships with their parents and to be able to rely on their parents' support and help" (p. 103). These authors go on to declare that positive parental relationships can remain more influential than peer group relationships.

Rationale for the Study

Past family communication research has employed the systems perspective. This perspective purports that in order to examine how a family consisting of individuals handles daily, as well as long term developmental issues, one must consider the how the entire family interacts and communicates (e.g., Bochner & Eisenberg, 1987, Carter & McGoldrick, 1980; Hill, 1970). Thus, Family Systems Theory provides a means of understanding the changing relationships within a family. In this theory, the structure of the family is that of an open sociocultural system in transformation (Minuchin, 1974). As the family develops through time, it passes through a number of stages that require restructuring. In such situations the family goes through systems processes, which can describe how it adapts to changing circumstances in a manner that maintains continuity while making restructuring possible.

Research regarding family structure delineates two primary dimensions, closeness and power, that have surfaced in many studies (e.g., Fisher, et al., 1983; Gehring & Feldman, 1988; Leigh & Peterson, 1986; Olson, 1986). Closeness, which is a sense of shared experiences, trust, concern, and enjoyment of the relationship (Lee, et al., 1990) is associated with positive adjustment in families (Gehring & Feldman, 1988). Power refers to influence or dominance; it can be seen as decision-making abilities or control in a situation (Gehring & Feldman, 1988; Rollins & Thomas, 1979; Madanes, 1981).

Both closeness and power in terms of decision-making abilities are essential qualities that are necessary to facilitate an adolescent's development into an autonomous adult. Autonomy enables a young adult to make decisions, deal with peer pressure, and counter a possible negative identity (Fitzpatrick & Vangelisti, 1995; Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986).

A prime condition to examine the restructuring of power and closeness within a family occurs when a child leaves home to attend a university (Golish, 2000). This experience is not only a turning point in a young adult's life, but also causes the family to renegotiate family dynamics. This study is designed to highlight the dynamics of closeness and power within the family as an adolescent leaves the family of origin's home to attend college. Further, this investigation will consider if there is a difference in family structure between freshman and upperclassmen. In order to examine the differences in the closeness and power structures in the families of freshmen to those of upperclassmen, four research questions were proposed:

RQ1: Do freshmen and upperclassmen differ in their levels of perceived closeness toward their siblings?

RQ2: Do freshmen and upperclassmen differ in their levels of perceived closeness to their

parents?

RQ3: Do freshmen and upperclassmen differ in their perceived levels of power in relation to their siblings?

RQ4: Do freshmen and upperclassmen differ in their in their perceived levels of power in relation to their parents?

METHODS

Participants

To examine the impact of leaving home to start college, the researchers recruited 52 college freshmen and 56 upperclassmen who met the criteria to be considered "traditional college students." Four criteria were used to determine whether or not students could be considered "traditional": (a) they began attending college immediately following graduation from high school; (b) they moved out of the family household when they started college and having been living away from home; (c) continuous college enrollment with no more than a one-semester break; and (d) they must not be married. Two upperclassmen were eliminated from all of the analyses because they indicated not living with either parents or siblings before moving off to college. In both cases they reported living with one or more grandparents and other family members such as uncles, aunts, and cousins. This exclusion brought the total number of upperclassmen participating to 54, and the total N to 106.

The students participating in this project were recruited from multi-section general education courses at a medium sized southern university and from several upper and lower division communication courses at a small northwestern university. The multi-section general education courses draw students in all levels of their college education and from all majors. At

the discretion of each individual instructor, some participants were offered a small amount of extra credit for their participation in the project while some were not.

Students participating in the project closely reflected the racial make-up of the universities in which the study was conducted. European Americans represented 83% of the sample; African Americans represented 12.5%. Only two students reported being from Hispanic origin, and only one student checked "other." Though the sample reflected the racial makeup of the universities, females outnumbered males in the sample more that two-to-one (females = 69.7%, males = 30.3%). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 25 with a median age of 20 and a mean age of 19.8.

Measures

Perceived power differential within the family system was measured by the Family System Test (FAST) (Gehring & Feldman, 1988). The FAST is a three dimensional figure placement technique designed to capture cohesion, or closeness, and power in the family system. Closeness is assessed by the distance between figures on a board, and power is measured by the height of the blocks upon which the figures are elevated. FAST has demonstrated both convergent and divergent validity with two other frequently used measures of family power and cohesion: the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scale (FACES III) (Olson, Portner, & Lavee, 1985) and the cohesion and control subscales of the Family Environment Scale (FES) (Moos & Moos, 1974). In addition, the FAST has been shown to be stable across time for early, middle, and late adolescents.

Procedure

Students came to a research room at a scheduled time to be interviewed one-on-one with

a researcher. To confirm that they were appropriate for the project, they were again asked whether they met the four criteria in order to be considered as a traditional college student.

Next the participants completed the Family System Test (Gehring & Feldman, 1988). They were asked the number of males and females in their immediate family. The researcher gave them the appropriate number of wooden figurines to represent their family members and instructed them to place the figures on a 9 by 9 grid to represent how close the family members feel to one another. After the student was satisfied that the closeness and the structure of the family were properly represented, the student was asked to elevate the figures on as few or as many blocks in order to represent the power structure within the family. Finally, to make sure the participant understood the implications of the representation, she or he was asked specific questions about the way the FAST was completed, such as "why are you and your father feel the most distant?" and "why is your sister the most powerful member of your family." Once the researcher was satisfied that the instrument was completed correctly, the orientation, height, family relationship, and age of each family member were recorded. The participant was thanked and given a confirmation of participation in order to show an instructor for any possible extra credit.

Data Analysis

The Pythagorian Theorem and the Cartesian coordinates (x, y) of each figure on the FAST board were used to calculate the distances between the figure representing the participant, and the figures representing each of his or her family members.

$$\text{Closeness}_{1,2} =$$

The result of this calculation was used to represent the emotional closeness perceived in this relationship. T-test comparing the emotional closeness scores of freshmen to those of upperclassmen were used to answer Research Questions One and Three.

In this investigation, power is seen as a property of the relationship, and not just an individual characteristic (Berger, 1994). Thus, to investigate power, power difference scores were calculated, using the z-coordinates from the FAST.

$$\text{Power difference}_{1,2} =$$

Positive values mean that the participant was perceived as more powerful, while negative values mean that the family member they were being compared to was perceived to be more powerful. A power difference score of zero means that the two individuals being compared were perceived to have equal amounts of power. The power difference scores were then averaged to create a mean power difference score representing the average power difference between the participant and his or her parent(s), and the average power difference between the participant and his or her sibling(s). T-tests using these averaged power difference scores to compare freshmen to upperclassmen were used to investigate Research Questions Two and Four.

RESULTS

Research Question 1 asked whether freshmen and upperclassmen differed in their levels of perceived closeness with their siblings. Eighty of the participants had siblings (34 freshmen,

and 46 upperclassmen). Since the group sizes were not equal, the Aspen-Welch t-test was used because it does not assume equal variance. The t-test comparing the average sibling distance scores between the two groups was not significant ($t = .381$, $df = 61.72$, $p = .705$).

Research Question 2 address power differences between the freshmen and upperclassmen participants and their siblings. Again, the Aspen-Welch t-test was employed. The test of average sibling power difference was not significant ($t = 1.503$, $df = 72.003$, $p = .137$).

The third and fourth research questions turned to the relationships between the participant and his or her parents. Research Question 3 asked whether freshmen and upperclassmen differed with respect to their perceived emotional closeness with their parents. For this analysis, 50 freshmen reported at least one parent in their families, while 52 upperclassmen reported living with at least one parent. Again, because of the difference in group size, the Aspen-Welch t-test was used for comparison between groups ($t = -1.313$, $df = 99.02$, $p = .192$).

Finally, Research Question 4 examined the difference in perceived parental power between freshmen and upperclassmen. The average parental power difference between the participant and his or her parent(s) was also found to be insignificant ($t = .326$, $df = 97.25$, $p = .745$).

DISCUSSION

The relationship of a college student to his or her family is an important and dynamic relationship. Students are living out of the family home for the first time and experiencing a new level of autonomy. Though no significant differences were found between freshmen and upperclassmen in their perceived feelings of closeness and power toward their parents or

siblings, these are in themselves is interesting findings.

When a child moves out of the home for the first time, Family Systems Theory (Minuchin, 1974) predicts that this event would necessitate a renegotiation of family relationships. Past research has demonstrated that emotional closeness and power are two key dimensions across which relationships constructed and maintained (e.g., Fisher, et al., 1983; Gehring & Feldman, 1988; Leigh & Peterson, 1986; Olson, 1986). So, why in the midst of what is considered a key turning point in the family structure, are no significant differences found between first semester freshmen who have only been out of the house for a few weeks, and juniors and seniors who have lived away from home (at least during the school year) for several years on either of the two key dimensions: emotional closeness or power?

Research has shown a negative correlation between the physical distance that family members live from one another and their perceived emotional closeness (Folwell, Chung, Grant, Nussbaum & Sparks, 1997; Folwell & Grant, 1999a, 1999b). In other words, the greater the distance family members live from one another, the lower their feelings of closeness; the closer their physical proximity, the greater their perceptions of emotional closeness. In this investigation, however, the students increased their physical distance from their families by moving out of the house to attend college, yet the perceptions of emotional closeness did not differ significantly for the freshmen versus the upperclassmen.

This finding is not necessarily inconsistent with previous literature. Cicirelli (1991a) found that physical proximity is not a consistent predictor of emotional closeness. He argues that emotional closeness may be more of a psychological representation in one's mind than overt, so that people could achieve feelings of emotional closeness even when there is no direct physical

contact. Students may be attending more to their mental representations of the closeness they feel toward their family members than to more physical representations of closeness, such as frequency and duration of contact.

Another possible explanation for these findings is that students, both freshmen and upperclassmen, may not live far enough away from their families to require a large renegotiation of their family relationships in terms of power and emotional closeness. They may have moved into the dorm or an apartment near the university, yet still consider their family residence their permanent home. The students may spend large amounts of time with their families in and around their family home, so that the relationships of the family system have not yet had to be renegotiated in terms of emotional closeness and power.

Perhaps a more compelling argument for this lack of observed change is rooted in Family Systems Theory (Minuchin, 1974). The theory proposes the idea of homeostasis, whereby systems react in order to resist change. In this investigation, the family system of each student would resist a renegotiation of relationships and family roles, even though the one family member has moved out of the household. So, even though the family system is experiencing stress from a family member leaving the household, the family has not yet changed to meet the new circumstance by renegotiating roles and relationships.

A third explanation for the lack of significant differences between freshmen and upperclassmen in their perceptions of emotional closeness and power within their families is that the students themselves have not yet recognized the changes in their family relationships. Their families may have in fact experienced enough stress on the family system to cause the family system to renegotiate roles and relationships, but the students may not realize that a fundamental

change has occurred. If this were the case, the effects of these renegotiated relationships may only be observable in retrospect as the students reflect on their college years later in life.

Finally, the results may be explained through different perceptions of what closeness and power means in the lives of freshmen versus the lives of adolescents. Freshmen may still be perceiving their family relationships as they were before they left home, while juniors and seniors may have developed a more cognitively complex way of viewing their family structure. For example, a freshman may think of parental power as just the physical, financial, or social influence on their lives while upperclassmen may think of parental power as the general influence that the way their parents raised them has on the way they conduct their lives. The idea of people developing more cognitively complex perceptions of relationships as they age has precedent in the literature. Patterson, Bettini, and Nussbaum (1993), found that the meanings of friendship changed dramatically. As people aged, they made more distinctions in the types of friendships and what those friendships entailed. So, it is possibly that what freshmen meant by emotional closeness and relational power were not the same things that the upperclassmen meant when they thought of those terms.

Limitations

This investigation has several limitations. First is that the families of the participants were not identical. Some students came from single parent families (n = 22), some from blended families (n = 19), and some from intact families (n = 65). Some students had only brothers or only sisters or no siblings whatsoever. Some were the oldest child, while others were the youngest or fell somewhere in the middle. The lack of being able to control the family structure lowers the ability to make direct comparisons from one family to the next. However, real

families do differ in size and construction, so research that uses a variety of family types and size is more generalizable to the population of all families.

A second limiting factor was the elimination of sophomores from the analysis. It is possible that changes in perceived emotional closeness and power take place in the sophomore year, and then revert to earlier levels as the student moves in his or her junior and senior years. In any case eliminating sophomores from the analysis means that this study cannot be applied to that group.

Finally, the lack of racial diversity is a concern in this investigation. While the sample of students reflected the racial composition of the universities in which the investigation was conducted, it was still an overwhelmingly European-American sample. So differences may be detectable in families of African American, Hispanic, Asian or other ethnic composition.

Directions for Future Research

Future studies examining closeness and power between late adolescents/young adults and their families could take a retrospective approach. As posited in this paper, people may need to be separated by events with more time before they can recognize major changes in their relationships. Such an investigation could use the Retrospective Interview Technique used in turning point research to help participants identify major changes in relationships (Baxter & Bullis, 1986). Next, participants could set up the FAST (Gehring & Feldman, 1988) board to represent their family during each of the major turning points identified. Individuals looking back on events may have a clearer understanding of the relational changes that took place in their critical transition from adolescence to adulthood.

The financial ties college students often have to their parents may be delaying the

renegotiation of family relationships. An option that would avoid this potential confound would be to wait until students become financially independent of their parents to conduct this type of investigation. Often this would occur within the first year after college graduation.

Finally, the two to three year span of time between becoming a college freshman and becoming an upperclassman may not be enough time to renegotiate long-standing family relationships. Perhaps a more effective approach to discern the changes that take place during this life transition would be to conduct either longitudinal research or cross-sectional research that spans a greater period of time.

Conclusion

This study examines the differences in family closeness and power structure between first semester college freshmen and upperclassmen. The results indicate no significant differences between freshmen and upperclassmen in their perceived emotional closeness with parents and siblings or between their perceived power differences between themselves and their parents and siblings. These results contradict previous research findings that indicate that emotional closeness correlates negatively with physical distance, and that parent-child relationships become more egalitarian after the child moves out of the household. However, these results may be consistent with the homeostasis concept which causes family systems to resist change, or with freshmen and upperclassmen having differing conceptions of emotional closeness and relational power.

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